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ABSTRACT

This study explored ways that nursery school staff work with parents, involve parents in evaluation, and improve the nursery experience for both parents and children. The process of assessing parents' and staff's views about all aspects of nursery life, and the use of these views to form the basis of an action plan, are described. The staff and parents of children attending two nursery schools were asked, during discussions or interviews or by means of questionnaires, to describe how parents and staff could work together. Results of the assessment of views were tabulated and discussed with staff. As a result of the study, areas to focus on in developing cooperation between parents and staff were drawn up in the nurseries, and priorities among these areas were debated by staff. Policy statements about cooperation between staff and parents were drafted and discussed in the nurseries. The nurseries invited parents to contribute information about their children's progress at home and in the nursery school, and to comment on nursery activities. (SM)

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SCRE Spotlights 37

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Sharing Action and Evaluation: parents and staff working together in early education

Judy Arrowsmith, with Dianne Lamont, Janet Murray

A recent research project into extending staff-parent partnership took place in nursery settings. The aim was to establish ongoing ways of working and of involving parents in evaluation as well as to make the nursery experience as good as possible. This Spotlight describes the process of tapping into parents' views and of taking account of these. The staff found this difficult but rewarding. At the end, the headteacher commented: "There is a new sense of direction and purpose in our work with parents and in our daily sessions for the children. Everyone in the nursery, children, parents and staff have benefited from 'doing research'. We hope that sharing this experience will encourage others to strengthen the bond with parents and to establish a working relationship which deepens mutual respect and understanding of each other's worlds."

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To find out about the process of parents and staff working ever more closely in school settings, a couple of 'snapshot' visits or requesting a brief report on 'how things are so far' is inadequate. A working relationship is built by a gradual process of growing confidence and trust. Insight into the process is equally gradual. It is clear from earlier research that each school has to work through, to an extent, what is right for the particular people involved and that there will be ups and downs. Steady improvement seems to depend on careful monitoring of what is going on by those involved combined with brief but efficient recording of what has been tried and tested. There must be evaluation from both staff and parents perspectives. It's an 'on-the-job' task.

STUDYING THE PROCESS

To gain insight into the process of parents and staff working together it was decided to conduct some action research first in two nursery settings. One was a small nursery class attached to a rural primary school and the other a nursery school with forty morning and twenty afternoon places. Nursery is the logical place to start. It is unique in its opportunities to establish from the outset good habits in terms of expectations of parental involvement and willingness to participate in honest exchange about the child's progress. It is helped by the daily face-to-face contact staff have with members of the child's family, or caregivers: exchange arises naturally from this continuing and immediate contact.

The study aimed to allow staff and parents time to think critically together about educational issues and their joint responsibilities, and to provide a brief record of the process which would include a monitoring commentary. It was hoped that parents and staff would become more aware of the importance of sharing. One result would be an agreed agenda for action for that specific nursery, with pointers for future development. Since a lot of hard work was involved for staff and parents, it had to be clear that the purpose was always first and foremost for the benefit of the particular school. The question was, 'How can we work *together* to make our children's experiences during the nursery years the best they can be?'

Some specific tasks had to be tackled over the course of the project. These were to find out the views of parents and staff about all aspects of nursery life at the outset and from this to prioritise agreed areas for development to form an action plan. In addition, the nursery's policy statement had to be renegotiated, as had the recording and evaluation procedures. It sounds—and was—a lot, but by the end of the process there was a growing sense of all being in it together.

ESTABLISHING HOW THINGS SEEMED AT THE OUTSET

The most complex job was to establish what parents (and staff) thought about the way partnership worked before any 'action' began. Each nursery went about this in a different way. In the small nursery class, contact was frequent and speaking face-to face was preferred, so they held a special coffee morning for parents and families (with a creche provided, since baby-minding

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was known to be a problem). As it happened, only women attended, although fathers and grandfathers regularly drop and collect some children. Perhaps the thought of a coffee morning was too much for men (pie and a pint in the local might have been more enticing!). The researcher led the group into discussing the nursery and the way parents were involved with it, making clear there were no right or wrong answers and that the important thing was to share ideas.

Things had to be more formal in the nursery school because of the larger numbers involved. Since talking still seemed better than asking for written answers, it was decided to interview the parents in small groups, using a modification of the nursery form which is given in the SOED's *Using Ethos Indicators in Primary School Settings*. Each parent received a personal invitation to come on 'Chat Day'. They were interviewed in groups of 2 or 3 although the researcher recorded individual responses for each question on the form. Parents knew that they did not need to agree in their answers. Those unable to attend could complete a questionnaire in writing at home. Interestingly, only four written questionnaires were received. Each parent who took part was thanked for their cooperation by a free raffle ticket, with the chance to win a prize. It was stressed to parents that the questions were being asked with the full co-operation of the headteacher and staff and with the express aim of making the experience in this particular nursery the best it could be for the children.

"Being involved doesn't mean you're always coming in."
(Parent)

• • •

"If you don't drop and pick up your own children, you sometimes miss out on things that are going on."
(Parent)

• • •

"It's no a new thing, ken, this working wi' the teacher. We've always helped oot wi the bairns and gone on trips: you just get on wi it. No need to ha'e a carry on aboot it."
(Parent)

• • •

"They tend to just tell you whether he's eaten up his dinner and things like that. I want to know how he's doing in general and where he needs a bit of encouragement."
(Parent)

• • •

So that each member of staff got a chance to give her own opinion, the staff were interviewed individually. In the nursery class, a semi-structured interview schedule was used, with ample opportunity for expanding answers. The nursery school used a modified version of the SOED questionnaire for Staff (Nursery Form) which made comparison with the parents' views easier. All staff were interviewed, including the cleaner, dinner lady and students. The whole interview exercise was time-consuming but useful and both parents and staff welcomed the opportunity to take time to air their views—something which often gets neglected in the busy routine of 'getting things done'.

MAKING SENSE OF THE INFORMATION COLLECTED

All the views were then tabulated, illustrated by quotations where appropriate. When it came to analysis of the information, however, each nursery used different methods. For the nursery class, the researcher studied and commented on the data and then discussed what emerged with the staff. The summary of suggestions from staff and parents became the starter for discussion of, 'Where do we go from here?'. In the nursery school, both the researcher and the headteacher with her staff commented independently on what the returns might suggest. Then they came together for discussion and forward planning. It was at this stage that the joint approach with the researcher working as a 'professional friend' or 'supporter', coming more objectively at the information and without any feeling of being threatened, was found to be most useful.

Recognising significant aspects of the replies and matters needing to be addressed was relatively easy but the staff were distinctly apprehensive. However experienced and confident staff normally feel, subjecting their professional work to open scrutiny brings anxiety. It is easy to get thrown by a detail or a minority comment, to grow elated or dejected before the full position emerges. As the headteacher said, 'We suffered the emotional impact of being asked our opinions, of hearing the opinions of others about our dearly held practices and well-established routines. We felt vulnerable, exposed and insecure. And then, almost overnight, energised and full of enthusiasm for the ideas that had emerged from our long discussions of the research evidence'. The researcher could share enthusiasms, be a shoulder to cry on and help brainstorm alternatives.

THE NEXT STAGE: POINTERS FOR ACTIONS

In each school, a list of areas for development was drawn up and priorities debated. Some matters were easy to spot; for example, the importance of making provision for pre-nursery children if parents were to be actively involved on the premises. Others were not so clear-cut: for example, when asked whether the nursery had explained the part parents can play in their child's education, parents seemed a bit vague. More than half thought the school had explained but it seemed to be in the past, a one-off opportunity and not an on-going process. Staff, on the other hand, felt that they constantly tried to do this, both through formal mechanisms, like the initial meeting, nursery booklet, parents' nights, and also informally, through chat. Staff agreed that this was probably an area which needed improvement and discussion with parents.

In a few cases, staff and parents' views were downright contradictory, for example, when asked if staff kept them fully informed about their child's progress, a number of parents felt staff tended *not* to tell them about their child's good points whereas staff said that *most* of what they said to parents was positive. This may reflect a difference in emphasis in that parents seemed to be looking for information about their child's overall character and behaviour (eg 'good at sharing toys') whereas staff seemed to report specific good behaviour (eg 'She's done a lovely painting this morning' or 'He ate his dinner up nicely today'). Even more dramatic were differences in perception between parents and staff about informing parents where a child needs help. More than one-third of parents felt this did not happen whereas staff said they would always do it. Parents seem to want clear guidance not just about strengths but also about areas for improvement.

In general, the very positive nature of parental responses was a lovely pat on the back for all the hard work staff had put in. Indeed, the enthusiasm was sometimes quite surprising and certainly heartwarming. It seems that staff often feel less appreciated than in fact they are by parents, and probably vice versa. Given a positive backcloth, constructive and honest appraisal is a challenging process, not something to be feared. Identifying areas which cry out for improvement or even simply areas of muddle and misunderstanding, is by no means negative—rather a spur to action. The headteacher says, 'Evidence showed that our community did value the work we do, that they want to know more about what we can offer and that they want to play an active part in their children's preschool experience. Fairly quickly we were able, as a staff, to define how we could match requests for information and help from parents to with the experience, strengths and interests of staff. We identified what we could cope with individually and collectively.'

"If you chat too long with a particular parent, it means others have to slip away without a word. It's quite a balancing act!"
(Nursery Nurse)

• • •

"I think the parents here would ***like*** *to be more involved and support the work of the nursery, even though sometimes they don't have the confidence to show it."*
(Student Nursery Nurse)

• • •

"Some children don't seem to do as much if their parent is on the premises so maybe parent help in the classroom should be restricted to only ***some*** *activities, at* ***specific times.****"*
(Student Nursery Nurse)

• • •

"We're glad we went ahead and found out about research and about how parents perceive our work. Research has been de-mystified for us—we've done it."
(Nursery Headteacher)

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CLARIFYING POLICY ON PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Running concurrently with this, was the drawing up of a policy statement about staff and parents working together. The nurseries were different in the ways they arrived at their policy statements. The nursery class teacher drafted a version for discussion, whilst the nursery school engaged in a more protracted process of brainstorming and redrafting, with constant checking and modification.

The nursery school already had comprehensive notes to parents on parental involvement but neither had a policy statement specifically on this, although they were planning to devise one. There was, however, abundant evidence of policy in action and the first task was to collate what was currently happening. This turned out to be impressive and astonishing even to those involved. After discussion, staff felt the policy statement had to be a succinct reminder of the aims and ways of bringing about real 'working together', spelling out why, what, how, when and where partnership is developed. They wanted to mention the extension of nursery activities into the home, the importance of talking with the child, of playing together and sharing what has been learnt at nursery—also that staff are willing to listen to what parents have to say about happenings at home, and welcome comment and suggestions from parents. They felt a note of activities just for parents would be useful, like coffee mornings and discussion groups, making it plain if and when pre-nursery age children were welcome to accompany the parent. They believed practicalities like *how* parents are supposed to know what is happening in the nursery should be clarified, and that there were records available for parents to look at and in some cases contribute to, in connection with their own child and with the nursery in general.

RECORDING AND RECORD-KEEPING

All nurseries keep records of work with parents but often the information is lost in daily diaries and in files including a lot of other information. This makes monitoring and evaluation more difficult except at the casual, 'How do you feel it went?' level. While informal evaluation is important, some formal, but brief, method of monitoring what has happened is crucial. The nurseries experimented with a number of ways of inviting parents to contribute to the records of their own children and of the nursery.

One useful method of involving parents with their own child's record of progress was tried out in the nursery school. This involved a Parent Chat Sheet, part

of which was filled in by the parent or written by a member of staff for the parent during the chat. This became a record of termly discussion signed by both parties. It highlighted the child's achievements and progress both at home and at nursery and identified areas where further encouragement and support were needed. Points from informal chats with parents, (concerns, questions, achievements) were added to the record by staff as and when they occurred.

To involve parents more fully in general nursery activities, both nurseries started a loose-leaf file with illustrated accounts of nursery life which was always available to parents for browsing. Space was left for parent/staff comment and parents were gradually encouraged to make more constructive comment than, say, 'Brilliant fun'. In addition, staff kept a running record of activities and the names of parents involved since this allowed a picture to emerge of the differing patterns of family involvement and, in particular, served as a check that no one was completely left out. An alternative record was a video, made by the staff of the nursery school with some of the parents. Such records are not only a stimulus for enthusiasm and an aid to forward planning but have communication value for a team of staff as well as for parents, and help continuity in case of staff change.

EVALUATION PROCEDURES

The idea that evaluation is important in everything was encouraged. In addition to informal chat about how things were going and where improvements could be made, staff were required, and parents were invited, to write a brief evaluative comment about each shared activity. At the 'Parents' Chat' parents were encouraged to discuss not only what had been recorded but also how valuable the term's work had been, bearing in mind the relationship of the goals on the recording sheet to general curriculum goals.

THE FUTURE

Armed with all the information, and with new recording and evaluation procedures, both nurseries began the long job of tackling specific issues raised. While these, of course, are unique to each school, other schools, by using similar methods, would come up with their own action plans, secure in the knowledge that those most involved with the school have had a chance to pull *together* to ensure that appropriate learning, with support, is taking place.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the project discussed here was the establishment of an honest critical approach in the staff and parents as they worked towards real partnership. By the end of the project, evaluation of each new step was beginning to become second nature and exchange was deeper than pleasantries or focusing only on a specific child.

> 'Working on the project was an *awful* lot of hard work, and a lot of soul searching but it's been worth it. I think at last we have a sense of us all being in it together—not easy though.' (Nursery Nurse)

SCOTTISH OFFICE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT (1992) *Using Ethos Indicators in Primary School Self-Evaluation: taking account of the views of pupils, parents and teachers.* Edinburgh: SOED.

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The full report *Working Together: parents and staff in nursery settings* is available from Judy Arrowsmith at Moray House Institute of Education, Heriot-Watt University, Carmond Campus, Cramond Road North, Edinburgh EH4 6JD. Price £7 (includes postage). Cheques payable to Moray House Publications.

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